

Q: Today is November 3rd, 2016. My name is Claire Martin and I am here at Newton City Hall with Laura McTarget.

A: McTaggart.

Q: McTaggart, sorry. And together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So to start off could you tell me about your connection to Newton?

A: Sure. I live in Newton. I moved here in 2008 with my family. And so I had no connection to Newton prior to this, but I have two kids in the public schools and we enjoy living here.

Q: And what were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I was in high school and I was, of course, looking forward to attending college and decided to apply for an ROTC scholarship as a means to pay for my education. So that's how I first became aware of the opportunity and the career path of the military. So I applied for I think an Army and a Navy scholarship and I got both of them and I had to choose, and I chose to take the Navy one, and I used that to attend University of Michigan.

Q: What do you miss, what did you miss most about home, aside from family and friends?

A: Well, I spent my career on ships, so I missed all the comforts of home, like a real shower. In the Navy on a ship fresh water is a very precious thing, because it's the first priority on an aircraft carrier where I served, that was my second ship, is to wash the planes, because salt water is corrosive. The salt spray they encounter is corrosive, so we used fresh water to wash the planes, obviously to cook our food, and to drink, and so the showers were available, but occasionally when there wasn't quite enough water you would have to go a day or two without,

and even when you did have a shower it's a nozzle that you hold it and you have to constantly press a button in order to make the water come out, so you can't, it doesn't just come down on you. So, you sort of, you get in there, you wet yourself, you hang back up the thing, then you soap yourself, and then you get the thing and you rinse yourself. It is unsatisfying, to say the least. So, I missed the showers and privacy and quiet.

Q: Now, how did you join and why did you choose that specific branch of the military?

A: Well, I didn't know that much about the military before I joined. I didn't have a long family history of service, but my dad worked as a government contractor and he had some awareness of the different services and what they did, and he advised me to pick the Navy, because Navy bases are in beautiful places on the ocean and Army bases are landlocked in places like Kansas. So, I was really happy about that. I got to live in Newport, Rhode Island, in Corpus Christi, Texas, and in the Tidewater Area, Virginia during the course of my service, and always when the ship was in port and I was driving to work I was always driving by water and get to see the ocean or it was beautiful everywhere I lived, so I was glad.

Q: How did you adapt to military life, including physical regimen, barracks, food, and social life?

A: For me, the Navy is not a really physical service, so it's not terribly challenging to be physically fit for what you need to do, so that was actually fine. Twice a year we would take a physical fitness test that would be as many pushups as you can do in two minutes, as many sit-ups as you can do in two minutes, and you run a mile and a half, and that was pretty much it. So, there was no getting up early and putting on boots and marching around. And also the thing with the Navy is there is three hot meals a day served to you on a ship, so it's not like in the Army or Marines when you're out in the field eating the MREs out of a plastic bag, so those were fairly, I guess it was okay.

The hardest part for me was adjusting to like military lifestyle and culture with the uniform, getting used to putting all those things on, the same thing every day, and figuring out whose rank was what, who you had to salute every day, the protocols to follow. That was all new to me, so I had to get used to it.

Q: Now, how did you stay in touch with family and friends back home during your time?

A: So, I was on active duty from 1992 to '96, so we didn't have email, there was no internet. We wrote letters, and it takes a long time to get a letter on a ship, so I deployed with both my ships, so you would be gone for a long time and you could write letters, and on the aircraft carrier a plane would land on the deck every couple days and bring us mail and take away our mail, and so you actually had fairly frequent communication. My first ship was a smaller ship, didn't have planes coming on and off every day, it was a frigate, so you waited until the ship pulled into port in order to pick up mail or send it.

So, we also had this cool new thing on my aircraft carrier when we deployed. It was, I forget what it was called, it was basically a phone that you could pay a dollar a minute, and there was like two on board the entire ship for 6,000 people, so you waited in line, you tried to get your connection, and half the time it didn't work or it was very cutting off, but it was such a luxury, because you could actually use it. I could actually say to a family member that I was going to call or try to call a certain dayish or timeish and you could have some chance of making that happen.

Q: Now where exactly did you serve? And do you remember arriving and what it was like upon your first impressions?

A: Sure. So, when you join the Navy the first thing they do is send you to school to learn whatever your expert, your expertise is going to be, so I went to Newport, Rhode Island to go to

Surface Warfare Officer School, so that was my career path. And that was about four months, just sort of living on the base and learning everything you need to learn to go work on a ship, the job I was going to have. Then I went to a couple specialty schools for like anti-submarine warfare. That was my particular specialty on the ship.

So, I arrived on the ship kind of prepared, I had the book knowledge, but I got there and met my division for the first time, these are the people you're going to lead. So when you're a Junior Officer you, that is, you need to sort of have this division that you're in charge of. It was 24 men, not a single woman, because anti-submarine warfare was my specialty, and even though women could be Officers in that job, women could not serve as torpedo men, gunners' mates, or sonar technicians, which those were the rates of the people who worked in my division. So, none of them had ever had a female boss before or worked with a woman as a colleague.

Women were still kind of new to that ship. So, when I got there, and we were prepared for this, because we talked about it in the school beforehand, but they had just undergone all this sort of sexual harassment training, they called it, so here is how you behave, here is the things you can't do anymore that you used to do, which was shocking the things they used to do on a ship, but like you can no longer, one of the rules I remember was they could no longer have naked pictures of women hanging in the workspaces. And this was considered a great affront to many people that they couldn't have that anymore, like their entire culture was going to crumble around them because there were women onboard now. So, there was a cultural change for them and for me, because I was really a minority for the first time in my life in that work environment. So yeah, it was really interesting.

Q: Now you said you were one of the first women aboard the ship. Were there other women with you and when were women allowed to--

A: No, there were other women on the frigate, not many, I want to say there were maybe just three or four female Officers out of a crew of maybe about 200 or so people total, and there were a handful of women enlisted personnel as well, and one female Chief. That was my first ship. My second ship I went to was an aircraft carrier which was actually a combatant ship, and I went to that ship right as they lifted the ban on women serving in combat. So, my first ship, even though I'm describing it like, it sounds like a combatant situation, I was an Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer, it was a frigate, but the ship's mission was actually to train Navy Reservists, it was a Reserve training platform, which is how they got around that ban of women serving. So I was there, but technically if that ship had been mobilized for war I would have been kicked off and the dude who came on and trained with me two weeks every summer would go to war with his ship.

But then they lifted the ban, I went to an aircraft carrier and was part of the first co-ed crew on that. That actually was the first, it was the first ship in the Navy that is considered a combatant to have a co-ed crew and deploy with it. And there were 6,000 people on an aircraft carrier, so there was plenty of women. There were probably 250 maybe women total. I didn't even know all of them, so it was a bigger contingent. But the same routine there, they had just gone through all this training, "Here is how we're going to integrate women. Here is where the women are going to live and this compartment is off limits and you have to yell." And I would go into my own division's birthing compartments, I would say, "Female on deck" and if they were going to come in the men's they have to say, "Male on deck" so everybody would know, because it's where you live, someone could be changing or just getting out of bed or something. So there were certain rules they put in place just to allow us to live together properly.

Q: Now you mentioned how there were some divisions between genders. Do you ever feel like there were tensions between male and females on deck?

A: That's a good question. I don't know if I would say tension. I'll say one thing, it was a challenge for the men who had served a little longer with all men, because they were used to things a certain way and now it was changing and change is hard for anybody, particularly when some of those changes felt like affronts to their comforts that they might have had before, like a woman could come into your birthing compartment and you're going to hear "Woman on deck" sometime and then you've got to worry about covering up. That hadn't been a part of life before.

But in general I would say my peers, people my age, my fellow Junior Officers, very supportive, totally welcoming. It was all cool. There were some older, crustier sailors who were not as happy about it, but the thing about the military is that the hierarchy of rank supersedes any challenges about gender. So I was an Officer, so I experienced nothing but respect and appropriate professional communications and relationships with enlisted personnel. I think there were some of the older Officers, if I had to really say there was anybody who made my life difficult it was older Officers.

Q: Now could you tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences, either positive or negative?

A: Sure. One sort of interesting thing I got to experience was on the aircraft carrier. I had just reported onboard, we were getting ready to deploy, but before we went off on our Mediterranean and Persian Gulf deployment this situation in Haiti came up. This was in '94 in the fall of '94 and it was Operation Support Democracy in Haiti. If you recall, our government got involved in going down there to, I'm having to remember the specific details of the political situation, but I think it was to help stabilize a government there that was experiencing some instability, and we needed to send troops. American troops were going to go and be there just in case.

So, the 10th Mountain Division of the U.S. Army needed to get to Haiti and they came to our aircraft carrier and said, "Will you take them?" because we were there, we were in port, we were

ready to go in Norfolk, Virginia. So we offloaded all of the Navy jets, all the F14s, F18s, all our Navy aircraft, the air wing that we normally deployed with, they got off the ship, we brought on all these Army helicopters and all these Army personnel. And I remember like in my stateroom, we had a six-person stateroom for Junior Officers, we had a woman from the Army came and stayed with us, because we had an empty rack, and the entire hanger bay of the carrier was filled with the Army and their green rucksacks, and you would go down to the mess decks and they were all there lined up for food. And they thought it was great, because a Navy ship has, there is one kitchen that is kind of serving food 24/7, hamburgers, hotdogs, French fries, pizza. They were like, "This is awesome." So they were like, I think, stocking up on good food and a place to sleep and the showers before we dropped them off in Haiti.

But that was a really interesting time, because it was different. We got to work closely with another branch of the military, which you don't often get to do on a ship, so that is definitely pretty memorable to me.

And then I guess the other thing I'll just say is our deployment to the Mediterranean Persian Gulf was really, was really cool. One of the great things about the Navy is you see the world only in really short little visits, because you go into a port for maybe two or three days, but we got to go to the United Arab Emirates, we stopped there, we stopped in Israel, a place I had never been, which was amazing, Greece and France and Italy, and so those are, it's really I mean a great way to get a little taste of travel with a bunch of your friends.

Q: Now, in these foreign places were you allowed to go out and explore or was it pretty regimented, you sticking to your role?

A: That's a great question. The rules for that really depended on where we were and what rank you were. So, oftentimes Officers, if you didn't know, you didn't just, we don't just like pull up the ship and anchor it and lock it down and all go party, so about a third of the crew has to stay

on at all times. So we were in what we call three section duties. So, if we're in port for three days the typical person on the ship would have one day where they were working and two days where they could actually go off and see things. And Officers often had a privilege, if it were in a safe place like a European port where you could even stay the night on shore. And there were a couple times I did with some of my friends, we got a hotel room, we took that shower that lasted forever, slept in a really nice bed. But most of the enlisted sailors had to come back to the ship at night, and depending on your, how senior you were, you had a curfew of a certain time.

In fact when we were in the Middle East, in United Arab Emirates, I remember we actually were told how to dress, and I remember wearing a long skirt and a long sleeve shirt, even though it was hot, but in that particular port, because they didn't want sailors going off into town and drinking and causing any disturbances, they actually set up a little recreation area for us on the pier next to the ship and they showed movies and there was popcorn and pizza and beer, and so everyone could kind of stay there and relax a little bit and not have to go out and get in trouble anywhere.

So yeah, but that is definitely a risk. I mean every time we went into a port, particularly when you get a lot of young men, and the average age on a carrier is 19, and so there is thousands of 19 year olds on average out there who haven't had freedom for several weeks and they want to go get drunk. And we actually had lawyers, you have lawyers onboard the ship, because it's like a city, and every port visit, as much as we would try, you coach people, "Don't do this. Be careful. Here is the rules. Please follow them." There is always one or two who get in trouble, get in trouble with local law, go someplace they're not supposed to go, they don't show up for curfew.

I remember one time a sailor was found like on the beach in the morning. His pants were missing. As you can imagine, it's young people, it's young people. So I often think, and not to stereotype, but this is, these behaviors are more associated with young men. Here I'm in a room full of women, so I can say these things, but I know I'm saying them to a greater audience. But

often when I hear complaints about the complications with men and women serving together in the military I think, “Well, sure there are complications, but there are also complications associated with large groups of male only cohorts going off and doing things, whether that is at work or when they’re not at work.” They have particular risks that co-ed groups don’t have as much too. So there is pros and cons and there is certainly tradeoffs.

Q: Now as for friendships you had during your, during the time you served did you have friends who worked with you the whole time or were your friends maybe, I don’t know, directed to serve in other places and you were separated?

A: That’s a good question. People come and go at any command. You sort of, you come onboard for however long you’re going to be, and you overlap with people, but typically when a ship deploys, I mean everyone is there for the whole shebang, because they’re not transitioning people on and off that much during deployment. It would be too complicated. So, I would say, I mean some of my best friends to this day are people I served with, because you really form bonds with people that is unlike other kinds of bonds you form in life. I mean if you consider you all have jobs, right, you go to work, and imagine if for six months like they close the door to your office and those were the only people you saw and you saw them at every meal and some of them slept above you and next to you, and when you had free time that’s who you hung out with. That’s how it is. So you really do form close bonds, like it or not, with the people you serve with. And so yeah, and I met some wonderful people, male and female.

Q: Now, what was it like to return to civilian life?

A: It was awesome. I learned pretty early, I mean I love my service and I am thankful for every moment of it, but I did figure out pretty early on it wasn’t a career I wanted to make long term, so my commitment after taking my ROTC scholarship was four years of Active Duty and four years in the Reserves, so that’s what I fulfilled. So, returning to civilian life was really great.

Actually as soon as I got out of the military went back to graduate school and got an MBA, so I went, and I got married like right after, so within a two week period I separated from the military, got married, moved to Boston, started Business School, and it was like all of those changes at once. But it was, I appreciated things about civilian life, I have to say, that I think here I was sitting in a classroom all day with people maybe complaining about the workload or worried about the fact that the coffee cart wasn't where it was supposed to be or open on time, and I was just, I remember thinking to myself, "Oh, I'm so happy here. How could anyone complain about a thing?"

It was just everything about the environment was peaceful, it was quiet, it was clean. Ships are noisy, industrial, dangerous. And so I think it was it just really made me appreciate the little comforts of life and privacy, having some space, being able to see different people.

Q: Now you mentioned dangerous. Would you mind talking about the dangerous aspects of the time that you served?

A: Sure. Well, I mean in honesty I have to say that I think serving in the Navy, the kind of career I had, I certainly did not face the kind of dangers that people who serve in infantry units face or even the pilots. Pilots who fly on an aircraft carrier, that is a very dangerous job. And we were not, we were doing-- Some of what we did was peaceful exercises, but some of it was actual enforcing the No Fly Zone over Iraq, and that is dangerous work. Most deployments you lose a plane or two, and we lost two actually not while we were deployed but right prior to during the work up training period. So, flying a plane and landing on a carrier, it's very dangerous work.

And then on a ship itself there is all kinds of things that can happen. I mean we watch a million safety videos all the time to really drill it into our heads. But you are conscious of safety procedures and protocols all the time, and that is something that has really stayed with me in my civilian life, even now. Recently in Boston there was that incident of the two construction

workers being killed in a ditch, and it's come out they didn't have the safety watch properly, maybe there were some other-- In the military you are so safe and so cautious and careful. We follow every rule all the time, because if you don't it's life or death.

So, working on the flight deck you wear your protective equipment. And we had somebody fall overboard, because there is jet wash and it's strong and the ship is moving and you're working up there near the edge. And so there are lots of dangers. Even inside the ship, the propulsion system is driven by a 1200 pound pressure steam plant, so those pipes that run everywhere, if they get a pinprick hole it puts out a shot of steam that can slice off a limb. The ropes, the lines we use to tie the ship up to the pier and the people who handle them, if they snap they can kill you. I mean so every little thing is, you're just always very careful, and we follow a lot of procedures. We train constantly for safety. Every person on a ship goes to firefighting school for three days to learn how to fight a fire, because you can't call the Fire Department and if the first team of firefighters goes into a space with a fire and they're all wiped out the second team goes in and then the third team goes in, and if it spreads, and so we all learn how to don the firefighting equipment, how to hold the hose, how to shore up a hole in the hull, I mean just basics.

So, I was lucky that I really didn't feel scared on a daily basis, but I also felt very prepared.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: I think it made me a more thoughtful citizen when it comes to the nature of engagements our country gets involved in. You listen to talk on the news about what should we be doing now in Syria, what should we be doing to fight ISIS, and when somebody says, "Why don't we just have a No Fly Zone?" that means something to me, having participated in one and knowing, and I was still very junior, it's not like I was the thought leader of these things, but I do appreciate they're

dangerous, that does mean going to war, that does mean we're putting people in harm's way, because we're putting planes up there and daring someone to fly into them, and if someone dares then you're engaged in combat. So, I think that is the first thing I would say, I'm thankful I did it as a citizen.

I believe in universal service. I don't think there should be necessarily a draft, because our all-volunteer military is a really very capable one and I think most military leaders don't, they wouldn't want to have forced conscription, but I would definitely encourage anybody I talk to who is thinking about it to give it serious thought, because it meant a lot to me to do.

And the other thing I will say is I grew up in a community that was not terribly unlike Newton, it was a nice upper middle class, good schools, safe community, and I would never have interacted with, met the people I met or been a minority somewhere or really gotten to meet the kinds of Americans that we don't interact with in Newton. I mean how many people do you know who are actively serving? Most of us don't in the Northeast in particular. So, that was a very good experience for me as an American.

[Side remarks]

Q: Now what would you like people to know a hundred years from now?

A: Well, I guess that I am happy to have served hopefully in a somewhat of a groundbreaking role, just because, not because of anything I did personally but because of the time I was in the service. I think a lot of people who had never worked with women before, when they met me and my cohort on our ships, it was like, "Oh, well that's new." And there won't be people like that in a hundred years from now, there won't be men in the military who say, "Oh, a woman, huh, that's new." So I think that is a good thing. I think, I just hope that in a hundred years we still

have a strong military that is still supported by our people and by our government, and I hope that it continues to be a career that people will choose.

END OF INTERVIEW